

Ecology and the *Bhagavad Gītā*

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There are people who are highly concerned that humanity is in danger. They warn that if conditions continue like this, if people don't care, the ozone hole will become so huge that people will have a radiation problem. For some, the whole concern is for the life of human beings and the suffering that they will have in the long run. Therefore, they say that in order to protect human life, we have to protect the environment, maintain the ecological balance—save the trees, save the rainforest and create green lungs everywhere.

While we agree with this, the *Gītā* has a wider perspective that includes all forms of life. Why don't all forms of life deserve protection? Why only human life? What is distinct about human beings and why do we place human worth above that of other creatures? What is the sanctity of human life? In which way are the lives of other creatures on this planet less sacred than human life?

In the third chapter of the *Gītā*, we have:

*devān bhāvayatānena te devāḥ bhāvayantu vah
parasparam bhāvayantah śreyah paramavāpsyatha* (BG 3.11)

Propitiate the deities with this (*yajña*). May those deities propitiate you. Propitiating one another, you shall gain The highest good (*mokṣa*). (BG 3.11)

The perspective offered by this verse is not even limited to life on this earth—its scope is cosmic. The *Gītā* here is talking about an awareness of all the forces. In this vision, the natural forces of the universe are not separate from Īśvara, the Lord, for the universe is a manifestation of Īśvara, the Lord. We can look at this Lord from the standpoint of a given force. As such, any phenomenon, any force, is considered a *devata*, a deity. This entire *jagat*—the world of names and forms, including natural forces—is a manifestation of the Lord. It is not that Īśvara at a certain time created the *jagat* as separate from himself. Although we may refer to the *jagat* as a ‘creation’ from the

¹ Published in the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam 15th Anniversary Souvenir, 2001

standpoint of the Lord as a conscious, all-knowing being, this is not ‘creationism’. We may use the word ‘creation’, but we follow it by the word ‘manifestation.’ Why?

In the view of creationism, the creator is separate from his creation. Since the creator must have a place, where, then, does he reside? If he is a distinct entity, where will he be? He would have to be located in space. But space itself is a part of the whole space/time creation. Where was the creator when he created space? The creator cannot be in space and create space, for if he is in space, space has already been created. If he is inside space, who created space? It is also not possible for him to be outside space, spatially. The Lord cannot be an individual located outside space, because which is the space that is outside space? Both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ refer to space. The only real possibility is that space is not separate from the Lord.

Only if we conceive of space/time as absolute is the creationism model feasible. But modern physics, consistent with the vision of Vedanta, has shown that space/time is not absolute. It has been proven that space and time are collapsible and that they come to manifest along with the other things. If that is so, space is more a manifestation of whatever was the unmanifest cause. ‘Creation’ is the formful aspect of the unmanifest—nothing new has been ‘created’. Space and time and everything in space and time—the whole thing—is a manifestation of Īśvara. Therefore, space itself cannot be separate from the Lord.

If that is so, then an awareness on the part of human beings that they are not isolated entities and that the entire *jagat* is a manifestation of Īśvara, is in order. With this awareness, we can strike harmony with the world; without or against this awareness, we can constantly rub against our world. The truth of rubbing is the one who rubs, who creates disharmony, gets rubbed. You cannot rub against something without getting rubbed in the process. That is the truth. And we are rubbed all the time, because we keep rubbing against the order of things. We rub each other and we rub other life forms and matter. And then we say that the world is inimical to us, and want to save ourselves from the world.

Our foolishness is that we rub and then complain that the world rubs us. “Why me?” is a common expression. “Why me?” Everybody asks the same thing. Nobody is exempt from asking, “Why me?” “Why me?” In everybody’s life, there are innumerable occasions to ask, “Why me?” In the morning getting up you may ask, “Why me?” Although you may use different words, the equivalent forms are constantly being murmured. This is due to not being in harmony with what is. In order to be in harmony with the world, you have to change the whole picture. You must have a bigger picture. Without a bigger picture, small things become big things. With a bigger picture, small things become smaller. The bigger the picture is, the smaller is your problem. The big picture really resolves problems, and Vedanta gives you the biggest picture possible. In this discussion, however, I am not talking of the biggest picture—just a bigger picture. The amazing fact is that even the bigger picture is enough to free you from a lot of rubbing.

The *Gītā* says that your awareness should not fall short of covering, of recognizing, *Īśvara* as the force because of which all life forms and matter are possible. The reverence for forms is a very, very important thing. Unfortunately, in many theologies, this reverence has been destroyed. Some theologies prohibited worship of any form made of hands or by nature, and located God somewhere far away from us. It was assumed that by doing so, they were updating tribal religion. In fact, in the process, theologies have lost their reverence for forms.

Such reverence, as expressed in the *Gītā* and other works, is an essential part of Hindu culture. When, as a child, I kicked the ground, my mother would say, “Hey, don’t kick the ground. That is mother earth.” “What mother earth? It’s dirt”, I said. “No! It’s mother earth, *prthivī mātā*.” Then I would think, “Oh, this is mother, *mātā*.”

I come from an agricultural family. During a particular month, the water would flow in the river and the agricultural operation would begin. The first thing was to sow the seeds, the paddy seeds. Then, after a few days or a month, they would remove the seedlings and transplant them in the fields. This operation was done by all the villages. Before sowing, although each villager would sow on his own piece of land, all the

villagers would come and do *pūjā* to a piece of land that belonged to the temple. They would do *pūjā* to the earth. Seeing this as children, we naturally developed a reverence for the earth. That shows a concern not for my life alone—but for the one that bears the life. Mother earth is not just something inert.

Inert is a point of view. For instance, when you dream, you dream mountains and you dream mountain lions. In the dream, the mountain lions are sentient and the mountains are inert. But you, the dreamer, are not inert, and the dream universe is nothing but you. It is you who are the dream characters and scenery. You are the creator and you are the manifestation of the dream world. So when the dream character thinks that the dream mountain is inert, it's purely a point of view. You may say one—the dream mountain—is insentient, and the other—the dream mountain lion—is sentient. But really, both of them are not separate from you—the sentient you who is dreaming. It is the same with *Īśvara*, the Lord. Everything we see in ‘creation’—other beings, as well as what we consider ‘inert’ material—is not separate from the Lord. That is why we don’t take mother earth for granted. The same is true for the other natural elements. Water is called *Varuṇa*. The air that you breath in is *Vāyu*. *Tvam eva pratyakṣam brahmāsi*. “You alone are the perceptible Brahman.” In fact, we don’t even need a form to evoke reverence. *Vāyu*, Air, is enough for us. Space is enough. Time is also revered by us.

Time is generally the one that people are afraid of, except when it is Fourth of July and you have a holiday. Otherwise, time is the one that frightens everyone. That is because time levels everybody. It is just with you, silent—a silent assassin. A silent destroyer, it changes the hair of all—the black haired-one, the blonde-haired one—into what we call gray. That, of course, is assuming that any hair is still there! Time is ubiquitous. It doesn’t spare anybody or anything. Empires crumble in its wake. But for Hindus, time is an object of worship. Is there another culture where death itself can be considered God? Death is not an ordinary thing. Hindus worship *Mṛtyu*—*Dharmarāja*. So that we have no fear of death, we worship. Suppose you see Mr. Death coming? You have to acknowledge him with reverence, you do *namaste*. He may even spare you for

some time, because he has to reciprocate your *namaste*. Because death is considered a natural part of the whole process, the fear of death goes away.

Similarly, every phenomenon, every force that is here, from the standpoint of Īśvara, the Lord, is not inert because it is a manifestation of that Lord. The awareness of forms being not separate from Īśvara makes you aware of your environment cosmically. Our environment doesn't stop with the atmosphere. The 'environment' has an extending radius. To begin with, the environment is your neighborhood. Then, extend that to the county, the state, the country, the continent, the globe, the system, the galaxy and the universe—that's our environment. It is not an ordinary one, really. It's an amazing one, having so much to offer in terms of your own intellectual adventure—so much to offer. We make inroads into Īśvara's mind when we explore and understand a particular subject matter. Therefore, we don't consider any knowledge to be secular. It is all Īśvara's knowledge.

To be in harmony with the environment, the *Gītā* tells us to simply do what we have got to do every day, with a certain awareness. Let all the *devatās*, the deities, do their jobs. Let the sun shine. Let the air blow, and let it not get stuck in one place. *Vāti iti vāyuḥ*, "Air is that which moves." We need all the natural forces. Let every one of them function. In fact, we don't call them 'forces'; we call them *devatās*, because we are not referring to some merely material force. 'Force' is Īśvara, the Lord, a singular noun that means all the forces together. All the forces are one force. Otherwise, they would be in conflict with one another. They form one singular force, which we call *śakti*. In Star Wars we heard, "May the Force be with you." May *śakti* be with you, the *śakti* of the Lord. That's the force.

If I am aware of the bigger picture, how can I ever do anything inimical to this planet and to any life form that is here? How can I eat an animal? It is very difficult. How can I harm anybody? How can I harm anything—even the minerals? In other words, how can I abuse them? I can use them, because we are all mutually dependent. I contribute, I consume. I am not merely a consumer—I am a contributor, too.

Sometimes the contribution is to create what I had to destroy. For instance, I am told in our *Dharma Śāstra* that if you must cut a tree, then you should plant some also. It is not an easy thing for a tree to grow to full height. It may take twenty years or thirty years—then in a few moments it is cut down. The tree has survived storms, cyclones, and more. When it was a small plant, in order to grow it had to survive the stray goat, the hungry cow, and the idiotic human being. Once it finally became a tree, someone may have cut it down with a chain saw. In earlier times, using a handsaw, it took some time to finish cutting down the tree. In the process, the person may wonder, “Should I cut this tree?” He may discover, “No, I should not” and go away. These days, however, it takes only a few minutes to fell a tree. So one does not have the time to reflect upon and change the action. If it is a whole day’s work, then you may be able to change your mind. Even if during one hour you don’t change, at least there is the possibility that in next hour you may, so that not much damage is done to that huge tree. Still it will survive. It may have survived twenty-five years to become this big tree. Some trees have even taken a hundred years, two hundred years, to grow. The coastal redwood trees in California have survived five hundred years or even a thousand years or more. Still the trees are there. And you go and cut them? It is an idiotic thing to do. But people do that. Sometimes you have to cut a tree. The *Dharma Śāstra* tells me that when I cut a tree, it is a *pāpa*, a wrong action that has undesirable consequences. Therefore, it tells me I should plant ten trees somewhere. Sometimes you fell a tree because you want timber. Or, it is in a wrong place, according to you, because you have decided to put a house there. In fact, it is in the right place. It is standing there, poor thing, never knowing that you would come there. Had it known, it would have grown somewhere else. But the tree, unfortunately, cannot walk around. It is supposed to be so. If the trees and plants were to walk around, you couldn’t get your salad because when you went to pick the vegetables, they would all run away. You would find the spinach running away, all the mango trees running away. Already we have traffic problems. That’s why they are *sthāvara*, stationary. They have to be what they are. They have to provide you with food.

All food is vegetarian. You can have a non-vegetarian meal, but food is basically vegetarian. When I say that you can have a non-vegetarian meal, I am not giving a

sanction for that. I don't want to disturb you, that's all. You can have a non-vegetarian meal but food is vegetarian, because if you eat a goat, a cow, or any animal, it has to first find food to give you food. To give itself as food, it has to find food. Where does it find food? In the same plants and trees alone. *Oṣadhibhyah annam*, "From the plants comes food." Therefore, food is vegetarian. You can have a non-vegetarian meal by making that cow eat the grass—the vegetarian food—and then eating the cow. That is not environmentally healthy, really. Eating the cow is neither healthy for you nor is it environmentally healthy. In fact, I would say it is wrong. It is wrong in the sense that I can live without eating the cow. When I can live without it, why disturb the cow? That is why the cow has been given four legs and the trees are not given legs—they are *sthāvara*, stationary. My food is outside, and it is vegetarian. "What is eaten is food," *adyate iti annam* and "Food is from the plant kingdom," *oṣadhibhyah annam*. I'm sorry, but that is the truth. All the proteins, all the carbohydrates, have to come from vegetarian food. So, although you can have a non-vegetarian meal, all food is vegetarian because there is no other source. On this planet there is only one source of food, and that is vegetarian.

When I cut a tree, I have to plant ten trees. Thereby, I protect. I am asked to do that by the *śāstra*. Otherwise, it's a *pāpa*. There is also awareness, not only of the life forms, but even of the so-called 'inert' matter, such as minerals, that are here. All of these are not to be taken for granted. They are here; I am here. I am a consumer; I also contribute to their welfare. Even an acknowledgment of the *devatās* is expected of me. It's not that the *devatas* won't function without that reverence, but my awareness of their contribution makes the environment, the cosmic environment, different. That is so because I am not totally programmed. I am a person, endowed with choice. And I have to exercise my choice; I have no choice in exercising my choice. What choice do I have to not exercise my choice? I have no choice. Because I can choose, I have to be aware of the whole cosmic environment, and choose to do what is required in a given situation. You do what is proper, what is the least hurtful. When you must hurt, you do the least hurtful thing. And be aware of the forces, letting those forces, those *devatās*—*Īśvara*—bless you. You are aware of them, and you invoke their grace.

By being reverentially aware of all the life forms and minerals that are here, you can deal with the more topical environmental problems. This ‘cosmic awareness’ precludes your destroying anything. We protect as well as we can. And the forces will protect us. That’s how it is. You have to protect what is to be protected. What is to protect you, you should protect. You can’t lose that. If you have armor, you should maintain it properly. When you are fighting with bows and arrows, your armor can’t be full of holes. If you are a right-handed tennis player at Wimbledon, you have to protect your right hand properly because it blesses you. The whole thing is in your hand—all the monies you’ve earned are all in one hand. If you are a right-hander, it is only in one hand. If you are a double-hander, it is in two hands. And so, you have to protect those hands properly. The whole cosmos is an environment that protects us. We are beholden to protect it. And that environment also includes fellow human beings.

That’s why the goal of environmentalism cannot be merely to protect human beings as an end in itself. It is not sound to simply try to protect human beings while justifying their destruction of the other life forms and matter, on the basis that humans are a more complex life form. I don’t find that human life is more sacred than the life of a bird or a worm—that is also life. If you argue that it is only a simple form of life, I say that a simple life form is more sacred because it is in harmony with its environment. It is this complex life form that is a problem. A simple life form at least does not go about destroying everything else. Its behavior is programmed.

The more complex the life form is, the more aware you have to be. As a human, you are a self-aware being; that is your distinction. Naturally, you have to be aware of everything else. If you are aware of everything else, then I would say human life is really something special. For unlike the cow, you have been given a tremendous freedom—the special capacity to choose your actions based on your awareness. This freedom stems from the very self that you are conscious of. It comes from there, because that self you are aware of is the plus you have. In that plus is your freedom. Although the self is there for a cow, too, it doesn’t seem to be totally aware of the self. If it were, it would have complexes like you have. This self that I am aware of gives me a freedom to choose to do or not to do.

You can choose to have a couple of months out of the year to hunt deer. For two months, during ‘deer hunting season’, you are free to hunt the deer. Why not also give the deer a chance to hunt you? Suppose the deer population decided, “Human beings are too numerous these days, and that is not good for us. I think for two months we will hunt them.” Then we are in the same boat. Then it’s fair, a free-for-all—survival of the fittest. I don’t agree with the justification that, “Swamiji, at this rate, the deer population will increase.” Let them increase. Why do you bother about that? Let them take care of it. We take on responsibilities that we are not supposed to assume. It is like someone losing sleep, worrying, “What should I do to make the sun rise in the morning?” If he considers this to be his problem, what can you do? We carry too many things that we need not. It is like a lady on the early morning train, which is empty, who is carrying a big basket of vegetables on her head. When she was asked, “Why are you carrying that on your head? Why don’t you put it down?” she replied, “I don’t want to load down the train.” We have too many loads like this. Think about all the loads you believe you are carrying, which you are not really carrying, which, in fact, somebody else is carrying. Yet we worry about what will happen tomorrow if we don’t carry these loads. What will happen tomorrow? Exactly what happened yesterday. Tomorrow the sun will rise. You are worried about the weather, so you check the forecast—what will the temperature be tomorrow? All right, now that you know the temperature, what are you going to do? Are you going to change it? If the forecast says that tomorrow will be 98 degrees, from now on, you worry about how hot it is going to be.

We create problems. We are funny people, really. We say we are evolutes of monkeys, but you should talk to the monkeys. I can imagine a conversation with a monkey, “You know, human beings are evolutes of you fellows.” The monkey said, “What?! They are evolutes? If that is the case, we don’t want to evolve!” What kind of evolutes are we? If you have a bigger picture, however, then you can enjoy what the monkeys cannot. Otherwise, monkeys are better off. They don’t destroy the environment as we do. If we leave them alone, they just fall into their slots in the scheme of things. Every snail, every oyster, falls into its own slot. It doesn’t really transgress it, but rather, does exactly what is expected of it. We have to learn that so that we don’t rub against our environment and so that we avoid getting rubbed. That is real ecology.